

THE KRAKOW PROPOSALS

A FOLLOW-UP TO THE 'YARNTON DECLARATION ON THE FUTURE OF AUSCHWITZ'

Preamble

A group of Jewish intellectuals from nine countries met at Yarnton Manor, Oxford, in May 1990 to formulate a considered response to the initiative of the Polish government to solicit suggestions from the Jewish world concerning the future of the Museum and monuments at the former concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The meeting concluded with the formulation of a set of recommendations, known as the Yarnton Declaration, and with an invitation by the Polish Deputy Minister of Culture to reconvene the group in Poland.

Accordingly, many of those who affirmed the Yarnton Declaration, together with Jewish colleagues subsequently invited to join the group, assembled in Krakow in April 1992 in order to visit Auschwitz, see how far the suggestions made in the Yarnton Declaration had been advanced, and to generate deeper involvement in the subject.

The visit provided a valuable opportunity for Poles and Jews, the two principal categories of victims of Auschwitz, to meet together in situ. The purpose was to consider the practical, rather than the philosophical issues.

The group paid tribute to the application and dedication of the Museum staff, who spend every day of their working lives facing the horrors of Auschwitz. It recognized that it is due to them, and to the strong support of the Polish Ministry of Culture, that the site of Auschwitz has been preserved to this day.

The group took note of the significant progress that had been made to date in implementing the recommendations of the Yarnton Declaration. However, it also registered concern about a number of problems that remained unresolved, and it took upon itself to propose a set of suggestions aimed at making a further contribution to the management of the site.

At the same time, the group acknowledged that these suggestions, which appear below, were being made by a body without formal institutional standing, and also acknowledged the importance of those institutions in the Jewish world working together with the Museum authorities. The group felt, however, that there was value in this additional voice expressing itself, precisely because of its independence, diverse expertise, and widely representative Jewish character. Its members would like to maintain a continuing involvement with the Museum by functioning as its international associates, to advise on the specific issues discussed.

We have not attempted to solve questions concerning the ultimate meanings of Auschwitz. What has concerned us is how to maintain the integrity and dignity of the site, prevent its trivialization, and to ensure continued respect for the memory of those who suffered and died there.

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Specific Proposals

A. We acknowledge the significant progress made in meeting the concerns expressed in the various points of the Yarnton Declaration. In particular, we are pleased to note:

(1) the agreement reached, thanks to a private donation from Canada, to provide regular transport between Auschwitz and Birkenau, thereby enabling more visitors to see both sites (point B4)

(2) the updating, correcting, and improving of the visitors' guide book (point B5)

(3) the start that has been made with the introduction of signs in Hebrew (point B8)

(4) the posting of new signs exhorting visitors to maintain the dignity of the site (point B13)

(5) the formation of the International Auschwitz Council, with the substantial participation of Jewish intellectuals (point B14).

B. Notwithstanding the progress made in meeting the concerns listed in the Yarnton Declaration, we view with disquiet those issues which do not appear to have been adequately addressed. In particular, we would mention that:

(1) the Museum displays and monuments still do not show clearly that over 90 per cent of those who were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau were Jews (point A2). We understand that plans are in hand to put this into effect; the new sign making reference to the Holocaust at the beginning of the general exhibition is certainly a start in the right direction, but much more needs to be done

(2) there is continued instrumentalization of the Auschwitz site, particularly by political or other kinds of collective manifestations of a non-commemorative character, and as a result of the failure to remove unauthorized plaques (point A6)

(3) there has been no significant improvement with respect to those defects of the national exhibitions noted in points A4 and B3, except for the closing down of those which were totally unacceptable. In particular, it is regretted that there is still no Jewish exhibition in the Museum which gives an adequate overview of Jewish religion, society, and culture, past and present

(4) the Museum bookshops still do not stock an adequately wide selection of books and audio-visual material on Jewish civilization and on the Shoah (point B10)

(5) the Museum restaurant does not yet have food prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws permanently available (point B11).

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C. We were impressed and moved by the expertise and dedication of the staff of the Museum. Following a detailed inspection of the site and extensive discussions with the staff, we should like to make the following recommendations:

- (1) a suitable locale should be identified and reserved for a Jewish monument of some kind, so that steps can be taken to implement such a scheme
- (2) a suitable locale should be made available for the public display of commemorative plaques that have been donated to the Museum
- (3) in the interest of maintaining the dignity of the site, greater control should be exercised with regard to the appropriateness of books, souvenir photographs, and posters on display or for sale
- (4) film crews likely to damage or otherwise affect the dignity and integrity of the site should not be allowed access
- (5) there should be a review of existing policy with regard to the proliferation of plaques. In particular, the need for commemorative signs (as opposed to informational signs) should be addressed, and consideration given to the language and content of new inscriptions.
- (6) continued attention needs to be given to structuring tour schedules so that visitors spend more time in Birkenau.

D. We recognise the efforts made by the Museum to undertake regular conservation work on the site. However, given the continued deterioration of the physical condition of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site, it is clear that the sheer scale of the conservation problem now and in the future will require very substantial funding and more sophisticated techniques than have been used hitherto. Given that the importance of the Museum site has been recognised by UNESCO, we appeal to the appropriate authorities to make the necessary application to UNESCO without delay in order to secure the resources to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the site, and to protect and conserve structures and artefacts of historical significance. We further declare our willingness to work together with the Museum to define a concrete policy and set of priorities on conservation matters. In particular, we suggest:

- (1) a moratorium on reconstruction with new materials
- (2) the restructuring of exhibits should be made with due consideration of conservation needs
- (3) the establishment of a modern conservation laboratory staffed with professionally trained conservators
- (4) a moratorium on the removal of objects from the jurisdiction of the Auschwitz State Museum.

E. Mindful of our concern for the future of Auschwitz, and the importance of transmitting knowledge of it to future generations, we would like to emphasise the key role of educational activities and programmes:

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(1) we welcome the Museum's new efforts at educating guides about the central role of Auschwitz in the murder of the Jews of Europe. We suggest, however, that members of our group and other Jewish scholars and intellectuals be co-opted to advise on enhancing this process of in-service training, particularly through seminars on Jewish life in pre-war Europe

(2) we acknowledge the necessity to create an awareness among Jewish educators of the non-Jewish history and symbolisms of Auschwitz

(3) given that teenagers and young people constitute a very high proportion of the visitors to the Museum, we recommend that urgent attention be given to the need to prepare suitable educational materials for teachers and pupils. We propose collaboration in the preparation of such materials, as well as in the preparation of new guide books.

F. We welcome the emergence of new centres for discussion and dialogue in the vicinity of the Museum. We hope that links can be established so that these centres can be more deeply involved in the future with Jewish educational programmes.

These proposals followed a Symposium of Jewish Intellectuals and Scholars on the Future of Auschwitz, held in Krakow and Oswiecim on 6-9 April 1992 under the auspices of the Research Center on Jewish History and Culture in Poland of the Jagiellonian University, in collaboration with the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies.

The Symposium was sponsored by the Polish Ministry of Culture, with additional support from the Polish-American Joint Commission for Humanitarian Assistance, Warsaw, and the Warsaw office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The Symposium's discussions on the subject of conservation greatly benefited from the presence of Dr George Wheeler, a research chemist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York who serves on the conservation sub-committee of the Auschwitz Preservation Project of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation of New York, which funded his attendance.

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The Krakow Proposals, signed by the Symposium's convenor on behalf of the participants, were handed to the following Polish colleagues, who assisted us in our deliberations throughout, with the request that they communicate them to the appropriate Polish authorities: Prof. Jozef Gierowski (Director of the Center and member of the Polish Presidential Committee for Polish-Jewish Relations), Prof. Andrzej Paluch (Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Jagiellonian University and co-director of the Center's research unit on Polish-Jewish relations), and red. Stefan Wilkanowicz (vice-president of the Council of the Centre for Information, Encounter, Dialogue, Education, and Prayer in Auschwitz, and member of the Polish Presidential Committee for Polish-Jewish Relations).

SIGNED BY THE CONVENOR
(on behalf of all the participants)

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Krakow, 10 April 1992

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